



NEWS

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Secretary Kempthorne Discusses Major Challenges Facing Northern Marianas with Island Leaders

SAIPAN, NORTHERN MARIANAS – On the first day of his visit to U.S.-affiliated Pacific communities, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne listened to concerns of Northern Marianas officials about the fiscal and economic challenges facing the island, recently passed federal minimum wage legislation and proposals to federalize the commonwealth's immigration system.

Kempthorne, whose department has overall responsibility for federal policy in the U.S. island territories, met with Northern Marianas Gov. Benigno Fitial, Lt. Gov. Tim Villagomez, members of their administration, Resident Representative Pete A. Tenorio, and several legislators and members of the business community during his June 6 official visit to this U.S. commonwealth in the Western Pacific.

"I heard first hand from leaders and residents today that the economy here in the Northern Marianas is suffering," Kempthorne said. "My visit today reaffirmed the importance of the Department of the Interior continuing to work and partner with the commonwealth to restore this fragile economy." Kempthorne was accompanied at the meetings by BJ Penn, assistant secretary of the Navy for Installations and Environment.

Later, Kempthorne visited Guma Esperansa, a shelter for women that is operated by the Catholic non-profit organization Karidat with financial support from the Interior Department. Kempthorne met with several victims of sex-industry human trafficking, who shared their personal stories.

"The stories that I heard today from these women are heartbreaking," Kempthorne said. "Some of the young ladies I met today were trafficked into the Northern Marianas as underage girls and forced to engage in lewd acts. The Department of the Interior will continue to work with the CNMI government, non-profit organizations and other federal agencies to stamp out this despicable criminal activity."

Kempthorne also visited the office of the Federal Ombudsman, under the Department of the Interior's Office of Insular Affairs, which helps ensure that guest workers in the Northern Marianas are protected from exploitation and abuse. Kempthorne expressed his strong support for the work of Federal Ombudsman Jim Benedetto and his staff.

In addition, Kempthorne delivered a keynote address at the commencement ceremony at Saipan Southern High School and met and thanked members of the environmental non-profit group Beautify CNMI.

Among other sites Kempthorne visited were Suicide Cliff, where thousands of Japanese soldiers and families jumped to their deaths at the climax of the Battle of Saipan during World War II, and American Memorial Park, a unit of the National Park Service.

Kempthorne's official visit to U.S.-affiliated Pacific island communities includes Guam and American Samoa, both U.S. territories, and the freely associated states of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands.

As Secretary of the Interior, Kempthorne is responsible for overall coordination of federal policy for the U.S. insular areas, advocating for the islands within the Federal Government, overseeing the distribution of appropriated funds for island territories, and administering U.S. financial assistance for the freely-associated states.

Located north of Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands is a 300-mile long chain of 14 islands, with 183.5 square miles of land. There are about 69,000 residents, located on the three principal inhabited islands of Saipan, Rota and Tinian.

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